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The Organizing Conference of the Federated American Engineering Societies

Washington, D. C., June 3 and 4, 1920

JAMES R. WITHROW

This brief note concerns itself with the effort made by engineers of every kind to form a comprehensive organization which will represent the solidarity of the engineering profession and act as a united instrument for public service.

The results of this prolonged effort may be summed up in the statements that after much preliminary discussion, eventually the Organizing Conference of national, local, state and regional, engineering and allied technical organizations met in Washington, D. C., June 3 and 4, 1920. This conference disclosed the universal sentiment in favor of some form of comprehensive organization among the engineering professions. The conference declared it to be the sense thereof that such an organization be formed. It was decided that the proposed organization in the opinion of the conference should be an organization of societies and not of individuals. The conference adopted a tentative constitution and by-laws. It referred the whole matter back to the various mentioned societies where it now stands. It provided an ad interim body to inaugurate the new organization by providing information and receiving accessions to membership in the new organization as rapidly as the individual societies approve thereof and apply for membership.

HISTORY OF THE MOVEMENT

In 1852 the American Society of Civil Engineers was founded. Subsequently came the national society for each of the main engineering fields, Mining, Mechanical, Electrical, Chemical, Ceramic and a host of subdivisions and state and local organizations. All of these were technical in their activities, and function independently. Prior to the war, the matter of federation of these bodies was considered, so as to adequately represent the profession as a whole. The war emphasized the need still more and appears to have stirred the engineer to change his point of view from developing the technology of his branch of the profession merely, to the broad one of greater devotion to the common cause and greater service to the public.

The effort of many years to form an all inclusive organization which culminated in this Organizing Conference was crystallized during the last two years by the work of the Joint Conference Committee representing the American Society of Civil Engineers, the American Institute of Mining and Metallurgical Engineers, the American Society of Mechanical Engineers and the American Institute of Electrical Engineers. The first step in this direction was taken June 27, 1917, when the representatives of the four above named societies organized Engineering Council, "To provide for consideration of matters of common concern to engineers; as well as those of public welfare in which the profession is interested, in order that united action may be possible."

June 18, 1918, the American Society of Civil Engineers adopted a resolution stating, "Sociological and economic conditions are in a state of flux and are leading to new alignments of the elements of society." "These new conditions are affecting deeply the profession of engineering in its service to society, in its varied relationships to communities and nations, and in its internal organization." A Committee on Development was authorized to make "A broad survey of the functions and purposes of the Society, in order that an intelligent and effective readjustment be accomplished, so that the Society may take its proper place in the larger sphere of influence and usefulness now opening to the profession." Similar action was taken by the other societies supporting Engineering Council. These committees appointed conferees who organized the above mentioned Joint Conference Committee, to determine in what manner these four societies could co-operate in matters of non-technical or welfare work related to service in public affairs. The Joint Conference Committee reported back to these societies in September, 1919. On January 23, 1920, the governing boards of these societies of Engineering Council, the American Society for Testing Materials, and the trustees of the United Engineering Society unanimously requested the Joint Conference Committee to call without delay, a conference of representatives of national, state, regional and local engineering societies of this country, for the purpose of bringing into existence the comprehensive organization recommended by the Joint Conference Committee.

The Joint Conference Committee thereupon invited some 110 engineering and allied technical organizations with an aggregate membership of over 120,000, entitled to send 184 delegates to the Organizing Conference. The list included all societies not subdivisions of national or otherwise represented societies whose chief object is the advancement of the knowledge and practice of engineering and the application of allied sciences and who are not organized for commercial purposes.

THE ORGANIZING CONFERENCE

In response to this call of April 19, 1920, there assembled in the Cosmos Club in Washington, June 3, 1920, 140 delegates from all sections of the United States representing 71 societies having an aggregate membership of over 110,000. The conference appeared to be thoroughly representative. This splendid response is an indication of the interest of the engineer as a professional man in his civic duty. The gathering is unparalleled and marks a forward step in the history of engineering societies in this country. The Organizing Conference agreed upon fundamental principles. The Joint Conference Committee had thoroughly

organized the program and the writer as a member of the Program Committee, had little work to do in committee.

Mr. Richard F. Humphrey (Civil Engineer), Philadelphia, Chairman of the Joint Conference Committee, called the meeting to order. Mr. Calvert Townley (Electrical Engineer), New York City, was elected Chairman, and Mr. J. C. Hoyt (Civil Engineer), Washington, D. C., was made Secretary of the Organizing Conference.

Major Gardner Williams of the University of Michigan raised the question whether we want any kind of organization, and if so, what kind. He, therefore, moved the resolutions, "RESOLVED, That it is the sense of this Organizing Conference that an organization be created to further the public welfare, wherever technical knowledge and engineering experience are involved, and to consider and act upon matters of common concern to the engineering and allied technical professions." "RESOLVED, That it is the sense of this Conference that the proposed organization should be an organization of societies or affiliation and not of individuals."

IMPRESSIONS OF THE ORGANIZING CONFERENCE

With this introduction it will be seen that the engineers of the United States are reaching out to become an increased force for public good. It was a privilege as well as honor to be a delegate to this organizing conference at which the writer represented the Engineers' Club of Columbus. The writer has never seen a large body of men buckle down to business so earnestly and continuously for morning, afternoon and evening sessions until after midnight on the final day.

It was a pleasure to experience the complete harmony of effort to arrive at a fair and amicable adjustment of the most diverse and mutually antagonistic ideas and ideals. These were defended on the various sides by giants at debate. Aggression was the rule. One felt that where everyone was anxious to return to his normal professional duties, one's ideas must be made clear without ceremony and *this* minute or never. The air was constantly clarified by the rattle and clash of rapid-fire debate. There was always obviously much still to do after the immediate point was settled. It was no race for weaklings with many of the country's foremost engineers constantly in action. The academic mind that shrivels from criticism, sharp and swift, never understands the progress that can be made by engineers through the frank and emphatic condemnation of proposals that appear erroneous or undesirable, courting the swift retort of hitherto undisclosed fact or explanation that eventually brings all to agreement on one side or the other or manifests the need for further information as a basis of action.

The questions at issue were among the most important that ever confronted the engineering profession in this country and will result in far-reaching effects for our profession. It is the business of the engineer to get results. This Organizing Conference was therefore a complete success. It harmonized the most conflicting ideals as to means and unanimously agreed to future formation of The Federated American Engineering Societies, as the new organization is to be called. Its council's first meeting (American

Engineering Council) is called for the middle of November.

THE A. A. E. AND THE ORGANIZING CONFERENCE

Many are familiar with the good work of a personal welfare character which the American Association of Engineers has been carrying on. It helps the young engineers to positions. It is a bulwark against the encroachment among young engineers of organized unionism. It in an important sense maintains solidarity in the profession and an esprit de corps. The A. A. E. was heavily represented by prominent engineers and able debaters. They stood out to the last for an association of individuals as against an organization or affiliation of societies. They offered the resources of an organization already formed and active. They asked that engineers join them and through expanding them take up the public service contemplated by the organizing conference. The space is too brief to go into details, but it was decided that the need was for the utilization of the experienced maturer minds in the engineering profession and it was felt that there need be no conflict between the proposed new organization and the A. A. E.

The fine character of the representatives of the A. A. E. was evidenced by the fact that while they maintained the correctness of their views to the last, they stated that as they seemed to stand alone in their opinions, they would co-operate with the new organization. When the roll was called to vote on the resolutions to form a new organization and of affiliations, not individuals, they were called first and voted aye—all 17 votes, amid great applause.

It is the hope of the writer that a way will be found for organized co-operation with this sturdy youngster among engineering societies and perhaps to utilize it as the welfare branch of The Federated American Engineering Societies.

PRESENT STATUS OF THE MOVEMENT

With all this effort at reaching a comprehensive professional engineering organization completed, the one question is, the extent to which engineering organizations are willing to tax themselves by voluntary increases in annual dues to support this ideal of public service.

As Major Bond of the U. S. Engineering Corps in his address at the Organizing Conference exclaimed, "Never again must we have incompetent conception of the requirements of modern war, but must place the engineer of experience directly in charge of such work," instead of the incompetent, however well meaning, amateur or teacher, as was done in the recent war. So, too, in peace must our public works be conducted not by the butcher, the baker or the candlestick maker qualified for office solely by desire, election or appointment, but by those trained or experienced in the doing of such things.

The discussions of the work of this Organizing engineering societies of the country will decide whether we will have a comprehensive engineering organization which will speak for these professions in public affairs where technical knowledge and engineering experience are involved as well

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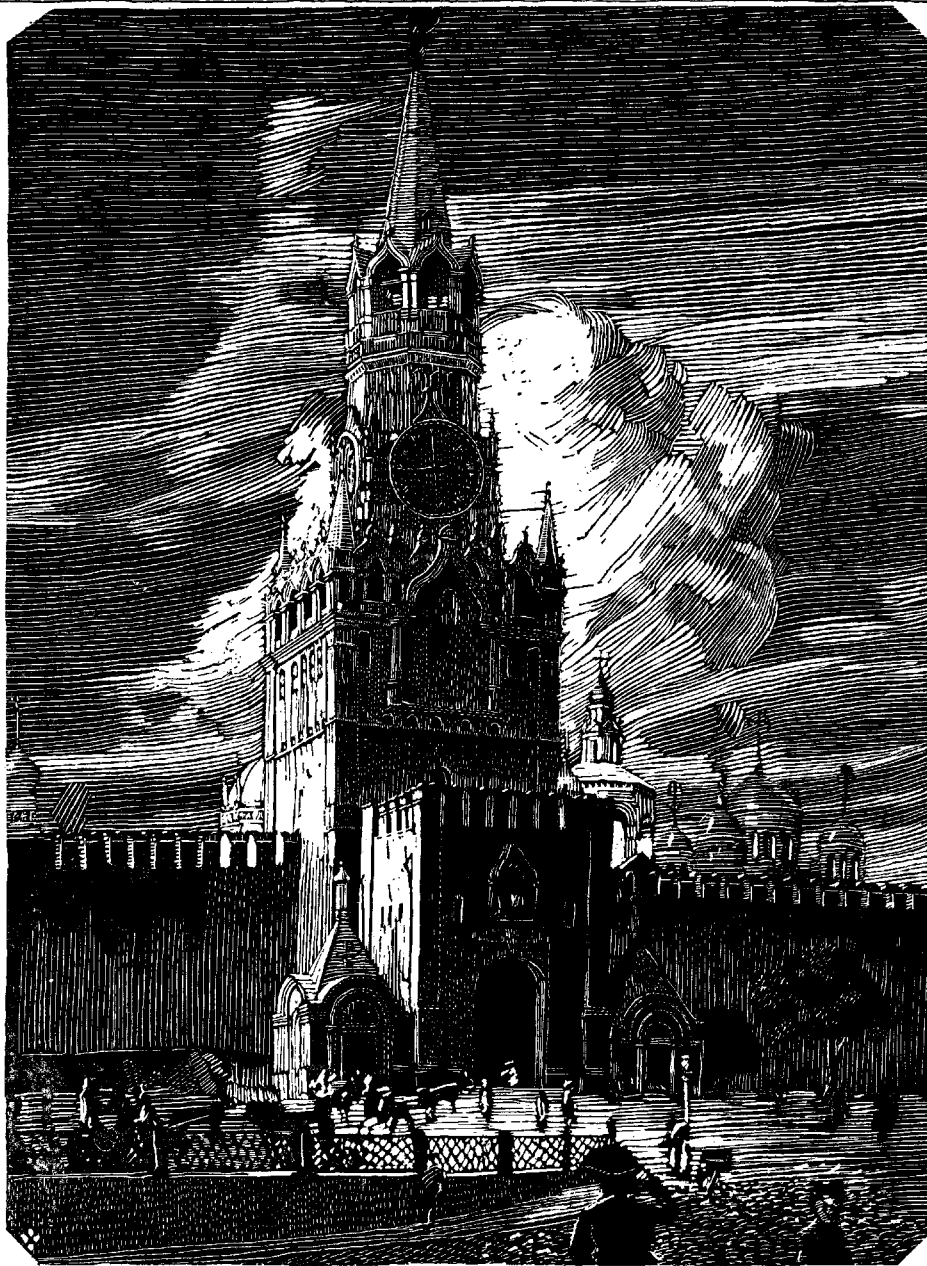
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3 AND 4, 1920

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as upon other matters of common interest or whether our respective societies shall as heretofore Conference now going on among the various pursue their separate ways and only occasionally and haltingly co-operate in matters of common concern.

It is the hope of the writer that it will be evident to engineering students that mere technology, be this ever so important, is not the sole interest of the professional engineer today. In this connection, let me quote from the preamble of the new constitution of the Federated American Engineering Societies as adopted by the Organizing Conference, June 4, 1920:

"Engineering is the science of controlling the forces and of utilizing the materials of nature for the benefit of man, and the art of organizing and of directing human activities in connection therewith.

"As service to others is the expression of the highest motive to which men respond and as duty to contribute to the public welfare demands the best efforts men can put forth, NOW, THEREFORE, the engineering and allied technical societies of the United States of America, through the formation of The Federated American Engineering Societies, realize a long cherished ideal,—a comprehensive organization dedicated to the service of the community, state, and nation."